Nunatsiavut, ‘our beautiful land’: Inuit landscape ethnoecology in Labrador, Canada¹

Alain Cuerrier, Courtenay Clark, Frédéric Dwyer-Samuel, and Michel Rapinski

Abstract: For Inuit in the subarctic transition zone of northeastern Canada, an intimate knowledge of the environment and local biodiversity is crucial for successful traditional activities. This study examines what kinds of landscape features and habitats Inuit of Nunatsiavut recognize and name. During interviews, community members (mostly Elders) were shown photographs from the region and were asked to describe and name salient types of places in Labrador Inuititut. The most frequently reported geographical units dealt with the region’s topography (e.g., mountain, island, flat-place), hydrology (e.g., river, bay), and superficial characteristics (e.g., bedrock, permanent snow patch). Ecological considerations were also prominent, such as plant associations and animal habitats (e.g., shrubby-place, wetland, caribou-return-to-place). Areas were often characterized by a dominant species or substrate type, being named using the plural form of the species and (or)substrate (e.g., “napâttuk” meaning ‘tree’ and “napâttuit” meaning ‘forest’ or “siugak” meaning ‘sand’ and “siugalak” meaning ‘sandy-area’). Some types of places reported by Inuit were significant mainly for traditional activities (e.g., berry-patch, seal-place, dry-wood-place, danger-place), aiding navigation and resource finding. Integrating Inuit conceptions of ecosystems and their component landscape units with those of contemporary science can improve our understanding of subarctic ecology, benefit climate change adaptation strategies, and Inuit language as well as culture conservation initiatives.

Key words: landscape ethnoecology, Inuit, traditional ecological knowledge, Nunatsiavut, Labrador Inuititut.

Résumé : Pour les Inuits de la zone de transition subarctique du nord-est du Canada, une connaissance intime de l’environnement et de la biodiversité locale est essentielle au succès des activités traditionnelles. Cette étude examine quels types de caractéristiques du paysage et d’habitats les Inuits du Nunatsiavut reconnaissent et nomment. Au cours des entrevues, des membres de la communauté (principalement des aînés) ont vu des photographies de la région et ont été invités à décrire et à nommer des types de lieux importants en inuititut du Labrador. Les unités géographiques les plus fréquemment mentionnées concernaient la topographie de la région (p. ex., montagne, île, endroit plat), l’hydrologie (p. ex., rivière, baie) et les caractéristiques superficielles (p. ex., substrat rocheux, banc de neige permanente). Les considérations écologiques étaient également importantes, telles que les associations de plantes et les habitats d’animaux (p. ex., lieu arbustif, zone humide, lieu où le caribou revient). Les zones étaient souvent caractérisées par une espèce dominante ou un type de substrat, et étaient nommées en utilisant le pluriel de l’espèce ou du substrat (p. ex., « napâttuk » signifiant « arbre » et « napâttuit » signifiant « forêt » ou « siugak » signifiant « sable » et « siugalak » signifiant « zone sableuse »). Certains types de lieux signalés par les Inuits étaient importants principalement pour les activités traditionnelles (p. ex., parcelle de baies, lieu de phoques, lieu de bois sec, lieu de danger), pour faciliter la navigation et la recherche de ressources. L’intégration des conceptions inuites des écosystèmes et des unités paysagères qui les composent à celles de la science contemporaine peut améliorer notre compréhension de

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l'écologie subarctique, profiter aux stratégies d'adaptation aux changements climatiques et aux initiatives de conservation de la langue et de la culture inuites. [Traduit par la Rédaction]

Mots-clés : ethnoécologie du paysage, Inuit, connaissances écologiques traditionnelles, Nunatsiavut, inuttitut du Labrador.

Introduction

Located in northern Labrador, the Inuit territory of Nunatsiavut is unique in Inuit Nunangat due to its location in the ecological transition zone between arctic tundra and open boreal forest (Lopoukhine et al. 1978; Brandt 2009). Traditionally hunter–fisher–gatherers, Inuit of Nunatsiavut have occupied the northern coast of Labrador for at least the last 400 years (Richling 2000). However, dramatic sociocultural changes have occurred recently, as people settled into permanent villages and adopted Euro-Canadian culture more extensively (Brice-Bennett 1977). One of those important changes is language loss, as Labrador Inuttitut is losing ground to English, most importantly in younger generations (Andersen and Johns 2005). Because Inuit ecological knowledge is not traditionally recorded in writing, specific terminology and concepts, especially regarding local flora and landscape, are at risk of vanishing as older generations pass away without transmitting their knowledge to the younger ones (Watson et al. 2003; Wenzel 2004).

Landscape ethnoecology provides a means of conserving the subset of ecological knowledge that deals with how cultures name, categorize, perceive, and understand their environments (Hunn and Meilleur 2010). By including socio-cultural aspects of the landscape, ethnoecology provides a holistic approach that can be complementary to contemporary scientific methodologies, often producing different interpretations of landscape patterns and environmental phenomena, which can result in overall better prediction of habitat and resource distributions across a landscape (Berkes 1999, 2008). This type of research and documentation is particularly important and timely in communities where language barriers and cultural shifts have contributed to a break in the flow of Traditional Knowledge transmission (Pearce et al. 2011). Despite its importance, few studies have dealt with Inuit ethnoecologies in their arctic homeland. Collignon (2006) does discuss Inuinait geographies of the central (Canadian) Arctic, and several authors (e.g., Aporta 2009a; Krupnik et al. 2010; Heyes 2011) have examined Inuit understanding of sea ice and its associated terminology, arguably a vital aspect of Inuit “landscape” ethnoecology given its predominance throughout the year and its importance for travelling and hunting. Place names, however, have been fairly extensively documented across the Arctic, particularly in Nunavik (Saladin d'Anglure 1968; Müller-Wille and Müller-Wille 1983; Müller-Wille 1984, 1987, 1989, 1991; KRG 2011), and can produce important insights into the kinds of landscape features that are salient for the people using those names (Johnson 2000, 2008, 2010).

In Nunatsiavut, some landscape categories can be gleaned from historical place names recorded in the region, notably by Brice-Bennett (1977) or Wheeler (1953). The latter lists over 500 Inuit toponyms, primarily from the Nain-Okak region of northern Labrador, applied to over 40 types of geographical features (e.g., island, point, peninsula, isthmus, lake, river, etc.). To develop a better understanding of Inuit conceptions of the landscape and its relationship with its inhabitants (plants, animals, and humans), this study aimed to identify and record the kinds of landscape features and habitats Nunatsiavummiut recognize and name. It focused on non-ice and (or) snow features as these have been covered extensively in other areas of the Arctic by other researchers (e.g., Aporta 2009a; Krupnik et al. 2010; Heyes 2011).

Materials and methods

Study area

Interviews took place in Nain (56°33'N, 61°41'W), the northernmost populated village in Nunatsiavut on the coast of the Labrador Sea in northeastern Canada. Nain is located at the northern edge of sporadic discontinuous permafrost (10%–50%; Natural Resources Canada 2012) in the Canadian Shield plateau physiographic region. At the border between subarctic and polar climate, Nain has a daily mean temperature of −3 °C, with a mean summer high of 16 °C and a mean winter low of −23 °C (Environment Canada 2012). The region has particularly high precipitation for its low elevation and consistently cold climate, with a mean annual rainfall of 400.4 mm and mean annual snowfall of 492.2 cm. Nain's population was 1188 in 2011, primarily Inuit, but among these a small percentage of European-heritage Canadians (Statistics Canada 2012).

Due to Nain's proximity to the tree line, a variety of plant habitats are represented at this boreal forest and tundra transition zone, the most important habitats being the following: marine coastal (upper and lower littoral); dry, rocky areas; aquatic and wet areas; and disturbed areas (by animals or humans; Blondeau et al. 2011; Cuerrier and Hermanutz 2012). Tree growth at lower latitudes and altitudes is replaced by scrub vegetation and lichen tundra further north and at higher altitudes. As in other regions located in the forest-tundra ecotone, the predominant tree species are *Picea mariana* (Mill.) Britton, Sterns & Poggenb., *Larix laricina* (Du Roi) K.Koch, and *Picea glauca* (Moench) Voss. Low-lying shrubs dominate the tundra landscape and are characterized by a number of species from the Ericaceae, Salicaceae, and Betulaceae plant families (Blondeau et al. 2011; Cuerrier and Hermanutz 2012).

Data collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with local residents (Martin 1996). Participants were identified and recruited based on suggestions of our interpreters and other community members, for a total of 18 participants (8 women, 10 men, average age 67.5, median age 65). Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours, depending on participants' knowledge and availability. Interviews were conducted in English and Inuktitut, with the help of local interpreters and (or) translators when needed. Interviews took place in March 2011, in homes or at our temporary residence in Nain. Informal discussions also took place in the field.

To guide the discussions, photos of locations and landscape features from the region were shown to participants. The majority of the photos were taken by the authors, supplemented by aerial photos and photos from publications of landscape features inaccessible within a day's travel (on foot or by boat) of Nain (e.g., KRG 2005). Participants were asked to point out and name features of the photos that they perceived to be salient elements of the landscape. Terms deemed relevant were recorded and reviewed in two dictionaries (Anderson et al. 2007; Pigott N.D.) following the first interview. Our spellings use the standardized Labrador Inuktitut writing system as outlined in the dictionary by Anderson et al. (2007), but reflect variations in speaker pronunciation, meaning that a single 'word' was not always transcribed the same way during interviews.

Approval for this project was granted by the Faculty of Arts and Science Research Ethics Board of the University of Montreal (CÉRFA-2010-11-241-A). Permission was granted for work in Nain and for the collection of plants by the Nunatsiavut Government under Land Use permit No. LIL030017PR. All participants participated under prior informed consent, having been explained the objectives and methodology of the project, and of their right to withdraw from the study at any point.

Results and discussion

The physiographic landscape terms we recorded primarily denote hydrological and topographic features, as well as substrates, snow, and other surfaces. Ecological considerations also played a role, with various plant communities and animal habitats recognized. Other types of places were reported based on their significance to traditional human activities. In most cases, the generic place terms were not reported as simple root words on their own but were instead mentioned in context as part of a sentence. Because of the complexity of Inuktitut grammar, this meant that the root words usually occurred with a suffixed postbase (i.e., a type of morpheme, or unit of meaning, characteristic of Inuktitut and a couple of other languages, often adding more semantic content than the types of affixes that occur in English or French). In some cases, it was obvious when affixes were used simply to make the utterance grammatical, but in other instances the affixes modified the

root word to an extent that this new construction could count as a whole new word, representing a novel and independent concept (Andersen and Johns 2005; Johns 2009, 2010a, 2010b for a discussion regarding this and other difficulties of listing words in Labrador Inuktitut).

We chose to record terms as they were reported to us, so as not to miss important nuances that may not have been immediately obvious. The challenge presented with this was that of over 1400 entries, fewer than 85 words (approximately 6% of terms recorded) were reported the same way more than once, even after combining pronunciation variations of 'words' with the same reported meaning. Four root words were reported by 10–12 participants ("sitjak" for 'beach', "kok" for 'river', "tasik" for 'pond or lake', "ujagak" for 'rock'), 17 reported by 5–8 participants, 25 reported by 3–4 participants, and 39 by 2 participants. The rest were reported in their particular form only once. An in-depth analysis of the postbases used in these words is beyond the scope of this paper, but several of the more important and frequently occurring ones are discussed below. Table 1 lists the most frequently mentioned terms. Some additional terms that were reported only once or listed in one of the Labrador Inuktitut dictionaries but not mentioned in our interviews were included in cases where they demonstrated unique concepts not otherwise reported.

Topographic and hydrological features

Most large and obvious features of the landscape were recognized and named (see Table 1). Various suffixes modified the size of an object or the extent of an area (Table 2). As shown in Table 2, "-uluk" is suffixed to indicate that its referent is small or smaller (and can be repeated for emphasis, "-ulukuluk", "-ulukulukuluk", etc.), whereas "-âluk" and "-suak" are aggrandizing. Alternatively (depending on speaker preference or perhaps a sub-dialectal difference), object terms may be preceded by "mikujuk" meaning 'small' or "angujuk" meaning 'large' to affect this same modification. Some concept of absolute size seemed to be implied with each degree of modification (one participant estimated for us, in meters, what height a waterfall should typically be to correspond to each suffix addition). The base words themselves, however, tended to have a wide range regarding the size of the feature they could denote, for example, "tasik" being a perfectly acceptable term for any contained body of (fresh) water, ranging from a small pond all the way to a large lake (but not so small as a puddle ("tasiaguk") and maybe not so large as a lake whose opposite shoreline could not be seen ("tasialuk" or "tasitsuak")). Likewise, "KakKak" can denote a range of convex features, being glossed as both hill and mountain. It seems modified terms can also be used to indicate their size relative to another smaller or larger feature, even if these do not correspond to the 'standard' sizes (e.g., the smaller of two ponds might be termed a "tasilulukuk" in one context, yet in another

Table 1. Landscape terms in Nain, Nunatsiavut.

Inuttitut lexicon	Meaning	Comments, uses, and (or) significance
Topographic		
Kigittak	island	
Kigittakuluk	small island	
Kigittakulukuluk	very small island	“good for nothing!” [because it’s too small to have important resources]
Kigittâluk	big island	
Kigittaumanik	almost island	
simikutak	island close to a cove or bay	
avakKutak	island in a river	
Kigittuk manilik	egg-island	manilik = eggs
tikigak, tikigatsuk	point, peninsula	
tikigatsukuluk	small point or peninsula	
nuvuk	point, tip, peak	
nuvukuluk	small point	
nuvutangk	big point	
natsak	high hill, sloped side of a mountain?	
natsasuak	steep high hill	
natsani paunngaluvini	there are a lot of berries on the hill	
KakKak	hill, mountain	
KakKakuluk	hill, small hill	
KakKâluk	big hill, mountain, big mountain	
KakKasuagaluk	big mountain	
situkKak	hill, slope	
sittuk, situngajuk	slide area (snow, ice, rock, land, etc.)	“falling straight down. . . waterfall, rocks, person, anything”
situjak	avalanche, rock face	“too steep to climb, steeper than natsasuak”
sittunik	talus, scree (rockslide, landslide)	
ujagak sittunik	fallen rocks, rock pile at the base of a slope	ujagak = rock
apputik situsimajut	avalanche, snow pile at the base of a slope	apputik = snow
uvingajak, uvinganik	slope	
innak	cliff, rockface	
innakuluk	small cliff	
innâluk	big cliff	
innaluit	cliffs, more vast than innak	
natingnak, natingajak	flat area, flat ground (e.g., in a valley)	
sittungajuk	flat area (on the ice)	
sikujak, manigak	flat land	
anniak, aniagâluk	flat area (anywhere, e.g., beach, between mountains, etc.)	
Kaittujângudluni anniak	flat rock area	Kaittuk = bedrock
Koppak	crack (anywhere, e.g., in a rock, in a mountain, in ice on a river or the sea, etc.)	
Kokpakuluk	small crack	
Kokpâluk	big or wide crack, crevasse	
Kunnik	crack, crevasse (deep and wide, going down a long way, “bigger than Koppak”)	
Kutsunak	crevasse	
kogutsunâk	gorge, ravine, small canyon, split between the rocks	
Kaiguk, Kaigusuk	cave, cache, any hole in the rocks	
Kogutsunâk	almost like a cave, crack, tunnel? (“bigger than a Koppak, you could crawl through it”)	
Killak	cave	
Hydrologic		
imak	water (salt water or fresh water), sea, ocean	
imaksuak	sea, ocean (“big water”)	
imappik	sea, ocean	

Table 1 (continued).

Inuttitut lexicon	Meaning	Comments, uses, and (or) significance
tagiuk	saltwater, sea	
kok	river	
kokuluk	small river	
kogukuluk	very small river	
kogaluk	big river	
koksuaq	big river	
kogutsuaq	very long river	
kogaluk sittungajuk	straight river	also: ikkatuk kugalak
kogaluk sittungamituk	winding river	also: sugunggajuk kok
kok pang	mouth of the river	
KopviKojak	stream running down the hill	means “crying”
kogalupsiugunga	sandy river bank	siugak = sand
Koluttuk	Waterfall	
Koluttukuluk	small waterfall	
Koluttualuk	big waterfall	
siaKiguk	water (river?) going over a rockface	
sukKanik	stream on flat land before it falls as a waterfall	
tasik	lake, pond	also means “to stretch”
tasikuluk	small pond	
tasialuk	large lake	
tasitsuak	big lake	“lake that’s so long you can’t see the other end”
tasiliuttaumanik	dam (manmade)	
tasiumajuk,	almost like a pond	might not have water during dry weather
tasiumajukuluk		but fills with water when it’s rainy weather
tasikuluk sitjamik	saltwater pond (small pond by the shore)	sitjak = shore
tasikuluk ulitjausuk	tidal pool? (“pond that the tide catches”)	ulik = high tide
tasik KakKamijut	lake in the hills or mountains	
tasijut killingani	edge of the pond and the plants around it	killinga = edge
tasimiutak	things that grow at the pond	
pigunnatuit tasikulummi	plants in or at the pond	
tasiujak	saltwater pond, bay resembling a lake	
tasiujuk	pond when the tide goes up	
Kausittuk	standing water? wet	where the mosquitoes come from, where they lay their eggs
nunak Kausittuk	wet place on land, swampy place	
Kautsik	wet area with living plants?	“never dry, always wet, alive, not dry and dead. . . explains everything growing there”
imatsuk	wetland, swamp, marsh, bog, fen, wet place	
imatsuit	wetlands	
imatsukuluit	many small ponds, area with puddles	
imatsugak, imatsugait	place where it’s always wet	
imatsugalak	wetland	
imatsualuk	large wetland area	
imatinnik	damp area that used to be a pond/that would become a pond if there was more water?	“when it’s spring and the snow is melting — when there’s water it’s called tasikuluk, when there’s no water, imatinnik”
imatsimiutak,	things that grow in the wetland	
imatsimiutait		
pigunnatuit imatsuni	plants in the wetlands	
suputet pigukviusunga	patch of cottongrass (<i>Eriophorum</i> spp.) plants	
imatsuk	growing in a wet or damp place	
kangidsuk	bay, cove	
kangidsukuluk	small bay	
kangitsuak	really long bay	
kangidsumanikuluk	small bay “that wants to be a big bay”	

Table 1 (continued).

Inuttitut lexicon	Meaning	Comments, uses, and (or) significance
iKaluit kangiapinga	river mouth into a bay?	“where the char go in” iKaluit = char
sitjak	shore, beach, shoreline	“where the water meets the land”
sitjangakangitsupsikanga	shore of a saltwater bay	in contrast to the shore of a freshwater lake
sitjaktiningananga	beach at low tide	
pigunnatuit sitjamik	plants that grow by the beach	pigunnatuit = plants
tinik, tiningajuk,	low tide, low tide place	
tinitsualuk		
tinitsuak	falling tide	
tinitunnik	lowest tide of the month	
tinittatumi	the beach area, where the water falls	
tiniup issua	low tide edge, “where the water falls to”	
ulik, ulingajuk, ulitsualuk	high tide, high tide place	
ulitsuak	rising tide	
ulitunnik	highest tide of the month	
ulittatumi	the beach area, where the water rises	
ulinniup issua	high tide edge, “where the water rises to”	
tinnitjiasuk	intertidal zone, place at low tide connecting land	
	that gets covered by water when the tide rises	
ulitjiasuk	intertidal zone, place connecting land when the	
	tide is high and it's covered by water	
ikKak	floor of a body of water (ocean, lake)	
ikkatuk, ikkatujak	shallow water, shallow water area	can see the bottom
ikkagojak	shallow water area between an island and the	
	mainland	
ikijasakuluk	small shallow channel	
ikkatuk kugalâk	small (shallow) river on the beach, or a river	
	coming down on flat land	
ippiutak, ittilik, ittiliasuk	shallow water, piece of land that connects an	
	island to the mainland	
attautajak	shallow enough to walk across, part of land	
	attaching two larger pieces of land (tide can't	
	separate them because it won't go over it)	
ikKigasâk	“neck of the rattle, because you can see the	
	islands are connected”	
itijuk	deep water	
ukualinâluk	area with really deep water where you can't	
	anchor	
Kammanik	deep area (under waterfalls)	“a lot of char in that area”
mallik	waves	
ikulliak	calm water	
auKannik	strong current area where ice won't form, thin	
	ice area, hole in the ice	
pujugak	mist off the water where the river (freshwater)	
	mixes with salt water of the sea, it turns to fog	
Substrates, snow, surfaces		
siugak	sand	
siugâlak	sandy area, “lots of sand”	
siugajak	riverbed? (sandy area)	“because there's no water coming down”
makKak	mud, clay, muddy place, “mucky place”	
matjak/matsak	mud, “more earthy than sandy, different from	
	makKak”	
makKâgalak	mixture of sand and mud, “sinky” area	
Kausituk	wet mud, muddy area	Kausituk = “wet area, alive, not dried up”
panittuk	dry, hard mud; dry place	
nunak	land, shore, earth, ground, place of residence,	“where it's growing,” “just basically the
	country	land”

Table 1 (continued).

Inuttitut lexicon	Meaning	Comments, uses, and (or) significance
nunajak	ground, earth, soil, dirt	“where there’s stuff growing, stuck on the rock”
nunaksuak	big land, mainland, world	
nunak mikijuk	small bits of sod? (“small earth”)	
nunaksiak	pretty or beautiful land	“that area that the bakeapples grow, it’s a little bit more wet”
nunatsiavut	our beautiful land	
piguungatuit	plants growing on soil (versus on bedrock)	“things that grow on the earth, because they’re not growing on the rock, on the Kaittuk” (contrasted with piguungatuit KaittukKanganik)
nunaupKanganik		
sanik	earth, soil	
itjuk	soil, the ground	
ujagak	rock	“rock on the mountain, in the lake, but not in saltwater area”
ujagaluit	many rocks, pile of rocks, big rock	“could also call Mount Sophie (a mountain) ujaluit, it doesn’t matter how big it is”
ujagakuluk, ujalakuluit	small rock(s), pebbles or slightly larger	
mikijuk ujalak	small rock	“small rocks, but bigger than sikKaliak”
sikKaliak	rock, gravel, “small broken up rocks”	
ujagalak	rocks, many different sized rocks, rock “all broken up”, gravelly place	“out on the land, or in town (like a gravel road or bank of the airstrip)”
ujagasutjuk	boulder	“bigger than ujalak, but not a KakKak (which is) so big you could walk on it”
ikkagok	rock	
ikkagoaluit	place with many rocks	ikkagojak = “shallow water area between an island and the Mainland”
alluvik	small rocks that you could step on across a brook, smaller than an island	
Kaittuk	bedrock, solid or flat rock, ground, rock bank, rock face, granite, rock beach	“area where there’s nothing growing on it (compared to itjuk ‘soil’), “all the steep parts where you can’t climb are called Kaittuk”, “rock beach typical of the outside islands”, “utsuKammak, tuligunnak (<i>Rhodiola rosea</i>) grow on the Kaittuk”
Kaittisuak	vast expanse (of rock)	
Kaittujúangudluni anniak	flat rock	anniak = flat
Kaittújak	bare rock area (not covered with earth)	“same thing as Kaittuk, it’s called Kaittújak where they start growing, because there’s no itjuk (soil)”
piguungatuit	things (plants) that grow on the rocks	
KaitukKanganik		
Kaittutuinami piguttuit	vegetation on solid rock	
nillak	ice, frozen?	
nigak?, nillak nunaup atani	permafrost? ice under the ground	atani = underneath
manituk	rough (ice) area	
manituâluk	very rough area	
manitunnituk	smooth (ice) area (compared to manituk)	
sittungajuk	flat (ice) area (“all straight”)	see sittungajuk = slide area “falling straight down”
sittuk	straight, flat	
aujuituk	glacier, frozen ground	
apputik	snow	
appusinek	patch of snow (in the summer, area is frozen year-round)	
apputik/apputek	snow patches, smaller (and lower down the hill?) than appusinek	
angiuvak	snow patch that never melts, unmelted snow	
apputik auliktuk	melting snow patch	

Table 1 (continued).

Inuttitut lexicon	Meaning	Comments, uses, and (or) significance
apputik situsimajut	fallen snow, avalanche snow	
KakKak apputilik	snow on the hills	
mangaijakKutik	place with snow	
maujak	deep snow	
aKittuk	snow that you would sink in if you walked on it	
Kangattâk	snow or ice overhang?	
Vegetation communities		
napâttuit	trees, forest	plural of napâttuk = tree, “plain tree” (spruce)
napâttuit	trees, sparse forest	“for example, on the hills, sparse enough that you can still see through them (compared to napattusuat, “forest”)
napâttusuat	dense forest	“when you’re in the trees and can’t see anything else”
napâttuluviniK	place with many trees, forested area	
napâttuni	in the trees, forest	
napâttukuluK	many small trees, young forest	napâttukuluk = small tree
akulligedlutik	lots of small trees or plants? mixed together	piguttuk = plant
napâttukuluK		
pigusimajut		
napâttuagait	small little trees, just starting to grow	napâttuagak = small or young tree
napâttualuit,	big trees, mature growth forest	napâttualuk = big or tall tree, “taller than a person”, napâttusuaK = very tall tree
napâttulialuk		
napâttusigaluit	many trees, big forest	
adjigengitut napâttuit	mixed forest, mix of different species of trees	
napâttuKangituk	area with no trees, where the trees don’t grow	
akKutiKannik	you are travelling in or on the tundra	
napâttuit issua KakKangi	timberline, “edge of the trees on the hill”	
upigasak	bushy place	upigak = willow or shrub
upigait	willows (shrubs, bushes)	‘smaller, scattered around’
upigaluit	willows (shrubs, bushes)	‘thicker, bigger willows’
upigatalik	shrubby place	
upigalialuk	very bushy and (or) shrubby place	
unuktualuit	many bushes	
Killagittulimi	amongst the (needle-bearing) trees	“that’s where the akkigilik (spruce ptarmigan) live”
Killagittuk, Killagittuit	needle-bearing tree(s) (<i>Abies balsamea</i> , by extension <i>Picea mariana</i>)	“worst kind of wood in the world for firewood”
pingiluviniK	place with lots of juniper trees (<i>Larix laricina</i>)	pingik = <i>Larix laricina</i>
pingialuit	many juniper trees (predominantly <i>Larix laricina</i> forest)	
pingialunnut	juniper tree (<i>Larix laricina</i>) forest, not much plain trees (<i>Picea</i> spp.)	“go here to find the dry wood”
nigipivingik	area with a lot of juniper trees (<i>Larix laricina</i>) where porcupines have been eating	“if he came across pingiks that had been eaten by porcupine, he would call it nigipiviniK”
ivitsukak	grassy area, grass, grassy area along the shore	
ivitsuat	grasses, where it’s damp, wetland	
paungaKautik	berry patch	paungak = <i>Empetrum nigrum</i> , also any berry
paungnalialuk	berry patch (“same thing as paungaKautik”)	
paungatuinnak	berry-place	real berry place? from -tuinnak = true, real?
paungatapvet	place for blackberries, the area where you pick blackberries	
paungaluviniK	(it has or place with) a lot of berries or blackberries	“only when a place has a lot of berries you could call it this, not in a year where a place doesn’t have a lot of berries”

Table 1 (continued).

Inuttitut lexicon	Meaning	Comments, uses, and (or) significance
paungatalik	pile of berries, place for berries	
paungasik	place for blackberries	“higher up in the country, further inland, not right by the water like the place for appiks”
Ecological		
panittuk	dry place	
sunakangituk	desert	“but you would never say sunakangituk, it’s better to say panittuk”
pannaKautik	dry wood patch	
KiuKaunnaituk	no more dry wood	
ikisimajuk, ikisimajutalik	burned-place, ‘fire place’	-ajuk = place, ikisimmak = fire
ikualasimajuk	burned-place, ‘it was burned in the fire’	ikualuk = fire
talinganik	shady-place	talik = shade
-Kautik	patch of . . .	
iKaluKautik	patch of char	good place for char (mostly around brooks, rivers) ikKaluk (s.), ikKaluit (pl.) = char
ammumajuKautik	patch of clams	good place for clams. . . clam = ammuajuk
uvilliKautik	patch of mussels	good place for mussels. . . mussel = uviluk
maniKautik	patch of eggs	good place for eggs. . . manik = egg
aKiKiKautik	patch of ptarmigan/partridges	aKiKik = ptarmigan or partridge
KikuaKautik	patch of seaweed	place with seaweed
kuaniKautik	patch of shark’s blanket (kelp)	place for shark’s blanket (kelp)
KunguliKautik	patch of sorrel	Kungulik = sorrel, “grow in the Kogutsunāk”
pannaKautik	patch of dry wood	dry wood = pannak
paungaKautik	patch of berries, crowberries (<i>Empetrum nigrum</i>)	berry-place (even if no berries currently there)
kigutanginaKautik	patch of blueberries (<i>Vaccinium caespitosum</i> , <i>Vaccinium uliginosum</i>)	
kimminaKautik	patch of redberry (<i>Vaccinium uva-ursi</i>)	
appiKautik	patch of bakeapples (<i>Rubus chamaemorus</i>)	
Animal habitat		
nukKangapvik	place where (any kind of) animal has been	where there is evidence of an animal?
nukKangak, nunaKajuit	place where the caribou come back to every year, “because they have their certain food, and there’s a river there where they can drink”	“each herd has their own nukKangak”, caribou = tuktuk, tuttuk
sitjait	fox burrow	“holes in the ground, where foxes make their homes and rear their young” . . . fox = tigiganniak
autturak	bird’s nest	
Kittungalupvik,	place where ducks go to lay their eggs	
Kitungaliuvik		
puijisiupvet	good place to find seals	seal = puijik
KulliligaKaluagaluk	good place for capelin	capelin = Killiligak
ikKaluKaluagaluk,	good place for char (mostly around brooks, rivers)	char = ikKaluk, ikKaluit
ikKalivet,		
ikKállivit/ikKállivik,		
ikKalungniavik		
uviluKasok,	good place for mussels	mussel = uviluk
uviluKatsiutiumivuk		
Places associated with people		
innullimi	village	
innuKangitumi	wilderness?	“place where there’s no people”
nunalinni	community, village	
tupiffik	campsite (one tent)	
tupiffet/tuppipvet	campsite (seasonal, where people would return to, more than just one tent/family)	
akKutik	route or road, trail, pass	

Table 1 (concluded).

Inuttitut lexicon	Meaning	Comments, uses, and (or) significance
akkusinit	trail or path	“any trail, even one made by animals”
takijualuk	trail	
Orientation		
ini	place	
nanituinnak, namutuinnak	everywhere, anywhere	
avani	north	
Kitâ	east	
sikinik	south	
Kangik	west	
Kang, Kânga	top	
KakKaupKang, KakKasuapKânga	top of the hill or mountain	
KikKangani	middle	
KakKaupKikKangani atani	middle of the mountain	
KakKakatani, KakKaup atani	bottom of the hill or mountain, valley	
ikKak	bottom	
issua	edge, border	
killinga	edge	
kappianattuk, kappianattutalik	dangerous area	

Note: Question marks (?) represent uncertain spelling or meaning.

situation be referred to as a “tasik” in comparison to an even smaller “tasikuluk”).

Sometimes features were named according to their resemblance to another feature. For example, “tasiujak”, literally ‘pond or lake-like’, denotes a saltwater pond or a bay resembling a lake. The suffix “-manik” seems to indicate a notion of ‘not genuine’, as in “Kigittaumanik” for ‘almost-island’, “tasiliuttaumanik” for ‘reservoir lake from a man-made dam’, and kangidsumanikuluk for ‘small bay that “wants to be a big bay”’.

Substrates, areas, and surfaces

The suffixes “-ujak” and “-ajuk” seem to denote an area characterized by a particular trait.

-ujak:

- ‘bedrock’ or “Kaittuk” → “Kaittujuk” meaning ‘bare, bedrock area’
- ‘shallow’ or “ikkatuk” → “ikkatujuk” meaning ‘shallow water area’
- ‘flat’ or “natingnak” → “natingnajak” meaning ‘flat ground, valley’

-ajuk:

- ‘low tide’ or “tinik” → “tiningajuk” meaning ‘low tide area’ (lower littoral zone)
- ‘high tide’ or “ulik” → “ulingajuk” meaning ‘high tide area’ (upper littoral zone)
- ‘fire’ or “ikisimmak” → “ikisimajuk” meaning ‘burned area’

- ‘straight’ or “sittuk” → “sittungajuk” meaning ‘straight (flat) area (on ice)’ or ‘straight (down) area’ (implying a rock and (or) landslide area or an avalanche track)

In a similar way, various aggrandizing suffixes, when added to substrate or other landscape terms, seem to denote an area typified by that substrate or feature.

-alak:

- ‘sand’ or “siugak” → “siugalak” meaning ‘sandy area’
- ‘mud’ or “makKak” → “makKâgalak” meaning ‘sinky or mucky area’
- ‘rock’ or “ujagak” → “ujagalak” meaning ‘rocky area’
- ‘wetland’ or “imatsuk” → “imatsugalak” meaning ‘wetlands area’

-suak:

- ‘water’ or “imak” → “imaksuak” meaning ‘sea, ocean’
- ‘bedrock’ or “Kaittuk” → “Kaittisuak” meaning ‘vast expanse, tundra?’
- ‘earth, soil, land’ or “nunak” → “nunaksuak” meaning ‘big land, mainland, world’
- ‘tree’ or “napâttuk” → “napâttusuak” meaning ‘dense forest’

-âluk:

- ‘cliff’ or “innak” → “innâluk” meaning ‘place where there is a large or many cliffs’
- ‘flat’ or “anniak” → “aniagâluk” meaning ‘flat area’

Table 2. Size affixes.

Root word	Suffix			
	-uluk 'smaller'	-ulukuluk 'smaller still'	-uak 'larger'	-âluk 'larger'
tasik 'lake, pond'	tasilukuluk (mikijuk tasik) 'small lake'	tasilukuluk, tasilukulukuluk 'small pond'	tasitsuak 'large lake'	tasiâluk (angijuk tasik) 'large lake'
Kollutuk 'waterfall'	Kollutukuluk 'small waterfall' (5–10 m)	Kollutukulukuluk 'very small waterfall' (<5 m)		Kollutuâluk? 'high waterfall' (>50 m)
KakKak 'mountain or hill'	KakKakuluk 'small hill'	KakKakulukuluk 'very small hill'		KakKâluk 'big mountain'

Other examples:

- 'island' or "Kikittak" → "Kikittaukak" meaning 'archipelago, several neighbouring islands'

Nunatsiavummiut identified a limited number of edaphic categories, which mainly considered superficial characteristics such as solidness and moisture level: "siugak" for 'sand', "makKak" for 'mud, clay', "matjak" for 'mud, more earthy than sandy, different from "makKak"', "Kausittuk" for 'wet (mud)', "panittuk" for 'dry (mud)', "ujagak" for 'rock', and "Kaittuk" for 'bedrock'. Three terms for 'earth, soil' were also given ("nunak", "itjuk", and "sanik") although any difference between these was not elucidated. This level of distinction is similar to what has been recorded for other northern hunter, fisher, gatherers (Legat et al. 2001), and is consistent with the fact that soil types are not as central in this type of subsistence strategy as it can be for agricultural groups, who can develop more complex classifications (Martin 1993; Oral and Beaucage 1996).

Although some vegetation types (mostly only individual species) were mentioned as growing specifically in association with a type of substrate (e.g., "tuligunnak" for *Rhodiola rosea* L. on the "Kaittuk", or "ivit" ('grass') on the "sitjak" ('beach')), habitat types specifically taking into account plant communities associated with different soil characteristics, such as those listed by Dogrib Elders (Legat et al. 2001), were not as extensively described by Nunatsiavut Inuit. However, other ecological associations were inherent when describing substrate types, especially in a marine context, such as what type of beach would harbour sea urchins and mussels ("ujagalak" for 'rocky (beach)') or clams ("makKâgalak" for 'muddy (beach)'). Some speakers even made a distinction between "ujagak" ('rock, on the mountain, in the lake, but not in the saltwater area') and "ikkagok" ('rock, in a saltwater area'), though whether this was simply a matter of the location of the rock or the specific mineral composition (or other characteristics) of the rock was not clarified.

This level of distinction around the marine context may be due to the important place marine landscapes play in the Inuit way of life. Amongst the Nunavimmiut — Inuit of Nunavik in northern Québec — associations between harvested organisms and their habitats were

made by adding the suffix "miutait" or "ait" to the root words of specific substrates or areas into classificatory terms, such as "tininnimiutait" for organisms from "tininniq" ('intertidal zone'), or "irmamiutait" (from "imaq", which means 'water') for marine mammals (Rapinski et al. 2018a, 2021). The relatively low distinction of vegetation communities in flat areas, on the other hand, may be a result of these types of places being covered in snow for a large portion of the year and useful more for the ease of travelling they provide than the plant resources they harbour.

Ecological associations

Plant habitats

Certain plant communities are recognized to grow predictably in association with particular landscape features and are often named according to their location.

- "pigunnatuit sitjamik" for 'plants that grow at the beach, by the shore' — such plants include "ivik", which is *Leymus mollis* (Trin.) Pilg., "malitsuagak", which is *Honckenya peploides* (L.) Ehrh., and "malitsuak", which is *Mertensia maritima* (L.) Gray
- "pigunnatuit imatsuni, imatsimiutak" for 'plants that grow in the wetland' — such plants include "appik", which is *Rubus chamaemorus* L., "suputaujak", which is *Eriophorum angustifolium* Honck., and "mamaittuKotet", which is *Rhododendron groenlandicum* (Oeder) Kron & Judd
- "pigunnatuit tasikulummi, tasimiutak" for 'plants that grow at the pond' — such plants include "suputaujak", which could be *Eriophorum angustifolium*, *Hippuris vulgaris* L., *Comarum palustre* L., and *Carex* spp.
- "piguungatuit nunaupKanganik" for 'plants growing on land or soil' (contrasted with "Kaittuk") — such plants include "apiujak", which is *Rubus arcticus* subsp. *acaulis* (Michx.) Focke, "sigalak", which is *Cornus canadensis* L., and several boreal forest species and trees including "napâtuk", which is *P. mariana*, "pingik", which is *Larix laricina*, and "Killagittuk", which is *Abies balsamea* (L.) Mill., due to Nain's proximity to the tree line
- "piguungatuit KaitukKanganik, Kaittutuunami pigutuit" for 'plants that grow on the rock' — these include "tuligunnak", which is *Rhodiola rosea*, "nakatannaujak",

which is *Oxytropis campestris* var. *johannensis* Fernald, “uKaujak”, which could be *Salix arctica* Pall., *Salix arctophila* Cockerell, *Saxifraga* spp., and *Woodsia* spp., “niKak”, which means ‘lichens’

- “natsani paungaluviniK” meaning ‘there are a lot of berries on the hill’ — such plants include “paungak”, which is *Empetrum nigrum* L., “kigutanginnak”, which is *Vaccinium uliginosum* L., and “kimminak”, which is *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* subsp. *minus* (Lodd., G.Lodd. & W.Lodd.) Hultén

These plant communities that are labelled according to where they are growing tend to be composed of multiple species, but unless a species is particularly salient — due, for example, to its size or usefulness — it suffices to call the area according to its associated landscape feature rather than according to a dominant species. Anishinaabe have somewhat comparable constructions in that a landscape feature is used to locate a plant community according to its geographical association, but they specify extra information regarding what type of plant community it is, such as ‘cottonwood point’ (Davidson-Hunt and Berkes 2003).

Nunatsiavut Inuit also recognized plant communities based on their predominant species, though not in direct association with a particular landscape feature. Areas abundant in a certain plant were labelled using the plural form of the dominant species, similar to how areas typified by a certain substrate or landscape element were also named using their aggrandized or plural form. For example, the term “napâtutit” literally translated means ‘trees’ (from its singular form “napâtutuk” meaning ‘tree’ — specifically *Picea* species, but also the generic term for any tree), but in context would be used to mean ‘forest’. A forest can also be described in terms of its dominant species (if other than spruce), such as a forest composed predominantly of larch, “pingialuit” (from “pingik”, which is *Larix laricina*), or fir, “Killagitutit” (from “Killagittuk”, which is *A. balsamea*). To specifically indicate that the forest is comprised of a variety of tree species, “adjigengitut napâtutit” meaning ‘mixed forest’ can be used. Other examples of plant communities categorized based on their dominant species include “itvisukak” for ‘grassy area’ (from “ivik” for ‘grass’, typically *Leymus mollis*), “upigasak” for ‘bushy place’ and “upigialluk” for ‘place with many bushes or shrubs’ (from “upigak” for ‘willow, shrub’, including shrubby *Salix*, *Betula*, and *Alnus* species), and “paungaliauk” for ‘place with many berries’ (from “paungak”, which means ‘berry’, specifically *Empetrum nigrum*).

This way of characterizing a plant community based on a particular area’s dominant species is fairly common with other Indigenous groups, though rather than using the plural form of the species name, these places are usually labelled in the form of ‘place of *x*’, where ‘*x*’ is the dominant species. For example, Chinantec farmers in Mexico use a term meaning ‘place of corn’ (Martin

1993), while Gitksan in northwestern Canada name pine groves as ‘place of pine’ (Johnson 2010).

Patches

Plant communities that are named using the plural form of the dominant species, or as ‘place of *x*’, tend to be areas of significant extent, but finer grained distinctions in vegetation are also made. Smaller areas rich in a particular plant or animal resource are explicitly denoted by Inuit by adding the suffix “-Kautik”, which means ‘patch’. The Anishinaabe of northern Ontario name vegetation patches in a similar way through use of the morpheme “-kwaa”, which also means ‘patch’, and its variants (Davidson-Hunt and Berkes 2003).

This seems to be a versatile term that can be used to describe a place where (a) there is at present an abundance of the plant (or other resources) in question (e.g., “KikuaKautik”, meaning ‘shark’s blanket (kelp) patch’ — anchored to the sea floor and thus rather stable in location, but might also apply when several entwined kelps are floating, not fixed in place but still visible as a distinct conglomeration), or (b) there is an area that is known to usually be plentiful (e.g., “paungaKautik” meaning ‘berry-patch’, a place with many potentially berry-bearing plants), or perhaps even (c) any type of habitat that would be appropriate for the resource even if one does not have immediate first-hand knowledge of whether the resource is in fact present (e.g., “ammumajuKautik” meaning ‘clam-patch’, muddy beach at low tide).

The “-Kautik” conception seems to be in contrast to places recognized for their immediate presence of something. For example, “paungaluviniK”, which means ‘(place where) there are many berries’, only denotes an area if there are currently many berries (even applying to places that are not necessarily the actual habitat of the plant, such as a pile of berries or “paungatalik”), but this term does not apply to a usual berry patch that happens not to be abundant that year (“Kunulisimaiguit”, which means ‘(berries) not going to grow anymore, all dried up’), or to a patch that has already been picked (“numutsiviusimajuk”). “NapâtuluviniK” is similarly a ‘place with many trees’, an alternate way of denoting a forested area, but perhaps emphasizing the current presence of trees.

Although the nominal base form was given for vegetated areas, often speakers gave us terms that locate speakers within the area in question, such as “napâtuni” for ‘in the trees or forest’ or “Killagittulimi” for ‘among the (needle-bearing) trees’. Gitksan has similar constructions such as “sbagaytgangan” for ‘among the trees/trees’ to indicate mixed forest, or “sbagaytgan am ‘mel”, which means ‘among the trees and (or) cottonwood’ (Johnson 2000).

For larger plants such as shrubs or trees and even tall grasses, it seems that within context, a postbase indicating that a term denotes a place (such as “-talik”, “-luvinik”, or

“-ajuk”) is not always necessary, the plural of the most abundant and (or) largest species being sufficient to indicate the place of abundance by extension of reference.

Animal habitats

Various places are characterized by their association with animals, many of these being represented by primary lexemes (as opposed to secondary lexemes or compound words), such as “auttutak” for ‘bird’s nest’ and “sitjait” for ‘fox burrow’ (“tigiganniak” means ‘fox’). Each herd of “tuttuk” or ‘caribou’ (*Rangifer tarandus* (Linnaeus, 1758)) have their own “nukKangak”, described as a ‘place where the caribou come back to every year’ because they “have their certain food and there’s a river where they can drink”. Animal traces are also well-recognized such as “nigipivingik” (“nigipingik?”) meaning ‘area with a lot of “pingik”’ (‘juniper tree’ (*Larix laricina*)) where porcupines (“illaKusik” or *Erethizon dorsatum* (Linnaeus, 1758)) have been eating’ (from “nigik” meaning ‘eat’).

The suffix “-apvik” or “-apvet” was also used several times, with the apparent meaning of ‘place where... house of...’, such as in “nukKangapvik” for ‘place where an animal has been’, “Kittungalupvik” for ‘place where ducks go to lay their eggs’, “puijisiupvet” for ‘place where seals are’ (“puijik” means ‘seal’ (Phocidae)), and perhaps also in “ikKalivet” which means ‘place where arctic char are’ and comes from “ikKaluk”, a word meaning ‘arctic char’ (*Salvelinus alpinus* (Linnaeus, 1758)). These places not only reveal specific areas where certain resources may be harvested but can also become important places for conservation and resource management. In an effort to revitalize the local population of walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus* (Linnaeus, 1758)) near Ivujivik (Nunavik, Québec), some Nunavimmiut Elders engaged the hunters in their community to be aware of certain islands like “Aivirtuuq” that once harboured large populations of “aiviq” or ‘walrus’ (Rapinski et al. 2021).

Implicit ecological knowledge

Knowledge of other plant and animal associations can also be covert, containing information about where to look for a particular resource or what types of places to avoid but without explicitly mentioning the resource. For example, a “Kogutsunâk” (‘cave’) or “Kunnik” (‘crack’) is known to be a good place to look for “Kungulik” (‘mountain sorrel’ (*Oxyria digyna* (L.) Hill)), just as “tuligunak” (‘roseroot’ (*Rhodiola rosea*)) is known to be abundant on the outside islands on the “Kaittuk” or ‘bedrock’. “Kil-lagittulimi”, which means ‘amongst the (needle-bearing) trees’ (from the word “Killagittuk” meaning ‘balsam fir’ (*A. balsamea*)) is described as where the “akkigilik” or ‘spruce ptarmigan’ live, “Kammanik” is the ‘deep area under the falls’ where arctic chars are abundant, and “Kausittuk” (‘wet’) refers to a wet or swampy place and is known to be where the mosquitoes grow and lay their eggs. Across Canada’s northeastern arctic and subarctic regions, terminology derived from landscapes provide a

wealth of ecological knowledge. The Nunavimmiut classification of organisms based on their habitat, for instance, not only links together morphologically distinct species (i.e., “tininnimiutait” means ‘intertidal organisms’, which include algae, echinoderms, molluscs, crustaceans, and fish) but reveals harvesting strategies bound by environmental constraints (Cuerrier and Elders of Kangiqsualujuaq 2012; Rapinski et al. 2018a, 2021). Hence, resources from the shore may best be harvested during the lowest tides of the new or full moon, whereas those from the sea require specialized equipment.

Relational and human-centric concepts

Some terms, apparently simplex words, expressed their relation to another landscape feature, such as “simikutak” meaning ‘island close to a cove or bay’ or “avakKutak” meaning ‘island in a river’. Others were simple descriptions: “nunak Kausittuk” for ‘wet place on land’, “tasik KakKamijut” for ‘lake in the hills or mountains’, “napâttuit issua KakKangi” for ‘tree edge on the mountain’ (alpine timberline), “tasikuluk sitjamik” for ‘(salt-water) pond by the shore’, “tiniup issua” for ‘low tide edge’, “ulinniup issua” for ‘high tide edge’, “tasikuluk ulitjausuk” for ‘high-tide pond’ (tidal pool?), “iKaluitkangiapvinga” for ‘where the char go in’, and “kogalupsiugunga” for ‘sandy riverbank’.

Some terms also dealt primarily with the human aspect such as “tupivik” meaning ‘campsite (single tent)’, “tuppivet” meaning ‘campsite (seasonal, multiple tents)’, “innullimi” meaning ‘village’, and “innuKangitumi” meaning ‘where there’s no people’, i.e., the area outside the village.

Terms relevant to travelling

Various landscape terms were relevant to travelling, particularly highlighting dangerous areas or places to avoid, such as “auKannik” meaning ‘strong current area where ice won’t form, thin ice area, hole in the ice’, “ikkagojak” meaning ‘shallow water area between an island and the mainland’, “ukualinâluk” meaning ‘area with very deep water where you can’t anchor’, or simply “kappianattuk, kappianattutalik” meaning ‘dangerous area’ (“you can expect something that is dangerous... because you know you’re not supposed to go there (can apply to many different places); need to let other people know about them”). Other terms denote places that would be useful while travelling such as “akKutik” for ‘route’, “akkusinit” for ‘trail or path’, “anniak, aniagâluk” for ‘flat area’ (“we might go along this area when we’re hunting because it’s flat”), and “ippiutak” for ‘shallow water, piece of land connecting an island to the mainland’, (“you could walk across here”, or could be a caribou crossing). Areas appropriate for shelter were also named, such as “Killak” meaning ‘cave’ (“when it’s bad weather you can go inside and keep warm away from the wind”) or “Kogutsunâk” meaning ‘almost like a cave’ (“could sleep in it when you are travelling”). Places that can be important for food or water are named,

such as “Kaiguk” meaning ‘cave, cache’ (“can store or ferment food in it”) or “mangaijakKutik” meaning ‘place with snow’ (“if you didn’t have water with you, you could melt snow like this, boil it and have it for tea, it’s not dirty”).

Orientation

Cardinal orientation terms were used (“avani” means ‘north’, “kitâ” means ‘east’, “sikinik” means ‘south’, “kangik” means ‘west’) in addition to speaking about landscape features or locations being further inland (toward “nunak”) from the coast or further out to sea (“inside” islands being closer than “outside” islands in local English) as well as up or down the coast. Cardinal directions are a form of absolute abstract reference, which has been found to be correlated with other cultures that live in non-urban areas (Majid et al. 2004). Regardless of whether directionality is based on an absolute frame of reference (e.g., north, south) or in reference to self (e.g., left, right), a crucial role in navigation and travelling is played by landmarks (Burenhult and Levinson 2008), stressing the importance of one’s ability to recognize landscape features.

Disturbance events

Successional communities were not overtly described by Nunatsiavut Inuit, though they did name “ikisimajuk”, which means ‘burned place’, and recognized this as a good place to find “pannaKautik”, a ‘dry-wood patch’ for firewood collection. Disturbance events and the types of places they create were likewise not extensively named by the Gitskan, Kaska, or Dene of northwestern Canada (Johnson 2010), but this is not to say that environmental changes go unnoticed.

Slide areas can all be referred to as “sittuk” (‘straight’) or “sittungajuk” (literally, ‘straight (-down) place’?). To specify, one could say “ujagak sittunik” for a rockslide or talus scree, “apputik sittusimajut” for an avalanche or the snow pile resulting from an avalanche. Interestingly, an alternate usage of the term “sittungajuk” as ‘straight-place’ seems to denote a very flat area, like one would encounter on a frozen bay or the ocean. It was unclear whether this is a dedicated term (i.e., that it always refers to these types of places) or merely a contextual term used in situations where what is being referred to as ‘straight’ is obvious. Johns (2010a) mentions this dedicated-contextual distinction as one of the difficulties of producing lists of words that denote ice in Labrador Inuttitut — a difficulty not isolated to ice terms.

Generic landscape terms, temporary descriptions of place, and permanent toponyms

Like many other Indigenous groups, talking about generic types of places is not as obvious for Nunatsiavut Inuit as referring to specific places known through personal experience. Hunn and Selam (1990) note that for the Sahaptin, fisher–foragers of the western United

States’ Columbia Basin, people usually talk about specific places and the activities appropriate for that place, rather than about generic types of places. When talking about specific places, people often use proper place names or toponyms.

Many of the generic place terms recorded here for Nunatsiavut are also used as specific place names, and many of these occur multiple times throughout the territory, for example Tasiialuk. Some of these have even been incorporated into standard English toponyms such as Tasiialuk Lake (i.e., ‘big lake’ lake). This is the case for Inuit regions across the Arctic. Collignon (2006) classified over 1000 Inuinait toponyms from the central Canadian Arctic, and many of the place names were equivalent (accounting for phonological differences between dialects) to toponyms in Labrador (from Wheeler 1953). While Aporta (2009b) stresses the importance of toponyms as nodes in creating a pan-Arctic network, connecting routes across the landscape, Collignon argues that the main utility of toponyms is not so much to aid navigation during travels, but rather to help recount the voyage to others, thereby humanizing the landscape and making it a place where people feel more comfortable because of their knowledge and inclusion in its history.

Conclusions

We have shown that Inuit of Nunatsiavut recognize and name a variety of kinds of places and habitats, based mainly on topographical and hydrological considerations, but also on ecological and practical considerations. Building on ethnobotanical work, this ethnoecology project is a step toward conservation of arctic biodiversity, as well as Inuit language and culture. As climate change renders environmental responses more difficult to predict, Traditional Knowledge of the environment will continue to contribute important alternative perspectives to contemporary science (Greene et al. 2008; Downing and Cuerrier 2011; Henry et al. 2012). Not only do Inuit make acute observations of a changing environment (Rapinski et al. 2018b), but changes to landscapes due to climate change negatively affect feelings of place attachment by disrupting hunting, fishing, and foraging activities (Cunsolo Willox et al. 2012; Cuerrier et al. 2012). Indeed, the importance of specific sites, rendered evident through naming, is akin to cultural keystone places (Cuerrier et al. 2012, 2015), whereas the complex relationship between the health of beings and that of the environment is in keeping with concepts of social-ecological health (Berkes et al. 2003; Parlee et al. 2005). Collaboration between scientists and local groups can help build the way forward toward increased adaptive capacity for Inuit, as well as Indigenous groups worldwide.

Competing interests

The authors declare there are no competing interests.

Contributor's statement

C.C. conducted field work, performed the primary analyses, and redacted the initial drafts of this paper. A.C. supervised the research and redacted the final drafts. F.D.-S. and M.R. reviewed and provided additional elements of discussion.

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Data availability

The data underpinning the work is not available.

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